



# Rachel Carson

A Quiet Woman Whose Book Spoke Loudly By PHYLLIS McINTOSH

**A** shy, unassuming scientist and former civil servant, Rachel Carson seemed an unlikely candidate to become one of the most influential women in modern America. But Carson had two lifelong passions—a love of nature and a love of writing—that compelled her in 1962 to publish *Silent Spring*, the book that awakened environmental consciousness in the American public and led to an unprecedented national effort to safeguard the natural world from chemical destruction.

As a trained scientist, Carson meticulously documented her conclusions about the long-term dangers of pesticides; as a skilled writer, she communicated those dangers in language the average reader could understand.

Carson was born 100 years ago in a small town in western Pennsylvania. Although she grew up far from the seacoast, she recalled that even as a child she felt “absolute fascination for everything related to the ocean.” She also was determined that one day she would be a writer.

As a student at Pennsylvania College for Women, she majored in English until her junior year, when she switched to biology—a bold move at a time when few women entered the sciences. She went on to graduate cum laude from Johns Hopkins University with a master’s degree in marine

biology in 1932. While teaching zoology at the University of Maryland, Carson spent summers studying at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory in Massachusetts, where she saw her beloved sea for the first time.

She began her civil service career writing science radio scripts for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries and in 1936 was offered a job as an aquatic biologist, only the second woman ever hired by the agency in a professional position. Carson spent 15 years in the federal government writing educational materials about conservation and natural resources and editing publications for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Carson had continued to write independently about her love of the sea. In 1941, she published her first book, *Under the Sea Wind*, a naturalist’s look at the struggle for life in the sea and along its shores. A second book, *The Sea Around Us*, which described the processes that formed the earth and the oceans, became a bestseller and won her worldwide acclaim.

The financial success of her books made it possible for Carson to retire in 1952 from the government and build a cottage on the coast of Maine. Her third book, *The Edge of the Sea*, a guide to marine life, was published in 1955.

Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* is available at the American Library in Kolkata and Chennai.

Carson had long been concerned about environmental damage from overuse of chemical pesticides and as early as 1945 had tried unsuccessfully to sell an article about pesticide testing to *Reader’s Digest* magazine. In 1958, with evidence mounting about the hazards of DDT [Dichloro Diphenyl Trichloroethane] and other pesticides, Carson was moved by a letter she received from friends on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, describing how aerial spraying of DDT had killed birds on their land.

She resolved to alert the public to the dangers and, once again unable to sell a magazine article on the subject, set to work on *Silent Spring*. Over the

next four years, she meticulously researched the book and, anticipating sharp criticism from chemical companies, compiled 55 pages of sources and an extensive list of experts who had reviewed her manuscript.

When the first installment of the book appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1962, the chemical industry decried her as a “hysterical woman.” The book quickly found favor with the public, however, especially after a major television network aired a special about pesticides that featured an interview with a calm, reasoned Carson.

In addition to TV appearances and interviews, Carson testified before several congressional committees and called

for some type of regulatory agency to protect people and the environment from chemical hazards.

Seven years later, in 1970, Congress created the Environmental Protection Agency, a direct result of the environmental movement sparked by *Silent Spring*. In 1972, the government banned DDT, the pesticide that had helped push America’s national symbol, the bald eagle, and other birds to the brink of extinction.

Few people knew at the time that while Carson was writing *Silent Spring* and enduring the controversy that followed its publication, she was waging a losing battle against breast cancer. In April 1964, at age 56, she died at her home in Silver Spring, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C., never knowing of the landmark legislation that would result from her work.

“Now I can believe that I have at least helped a little,” she had written modestly to a friend in 1962. “It would be unrealistic to believe one book could bring a complete change.” She could not have been more wrong. As Carson biographer Linda Lear has noted: “In the face of personal attack, and in spite of being gravely ill, Rachel Carson provided a compelling example of the power of the single individual to bring about change.”

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